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# Ethnicity and restructuring of the state in Ethiopia

Berhanu Gutema Balcha<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Ethnicity has been a key criterion in restructuring the Ethiopian state in federal lines. The cases of dissolved ethno-federal arrangements such as that of the USSR, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia resonated pessimism about the feasibility of federalism based on ethno linguistic lines. In contrast, some relatively successful ethno-linguistic federal arrangements like those of India and Switzerland have shown the feasibility of ethnic federalism in divided societies. Both, critiques and advocates of ethnic federalism have their justifications. Advocates hold that ethnic federalism could reduce groups' disparity, promote accommodation and self-rule, encourage ethnic harmony through co-existence and reduce secession or disintegration tendencies (Lijphart 1977 and 2002, Gurr and Harff 1994; Hameso 1997; Kimenyi 1997; Clapham 2001; O'Leary 2002; Osaghae 2006; Kymlicka 2006). In contrast, critiques argue that ethnic federalism could institutionalise ethnic discrimination, obstruct individual citizens rights, strengthen centrifugal forces, introduce zero-sum ethnic competition and generate dangerous reactions like ethnic cleansing, expulsion and disintegration (Lipset 1963; Nordlinger 1972; Ake 1996; Fleiner 2000; Nyong'o 2002; Egwe 2003; Mamdani 2005).

## Defining Ethnicity

There is no generally agreed definition or theory of ethnicity; scholars define and describe the term in various ways, such as a modern cultural construct, a universal social phenomenon, a personal identity, a peculiar kind of informal political organisation or affective association. To begin with those who identify the symbolic and subjective side of ethnicity, Hutchinson and Smith (1996), for example, define *ethnie* (the French term used to denote an 'ethnic community' or 'ethnic group') as 'a named human population with a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members' (Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 7). In this

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definition, the subjective and ethno-symbolic importance and orientation to the past play a key role as 'the destiny of the community is bound up with ethno-history, with its own understanding of a unique, shared past.

Contrary to this approach, Fukui and Markakis refute the attempt to define ethnic identities on the basis of genealogical or cultural criteria by claiming that a complex pattern of fusion and fission among groups is the reality. They argue therefore that ethnic identities are to be understood as essentially political products of socially defined and historically determined specific situation (Fuku and Markakis 1994:06). Similar to this argument, David Turton argues, 'an ethnic group is not a group because of ethnicity but because its members engage in common action and share common interests' (Turton 1994: 17). However this assertion does not necessarily mean that the assumed genealogical or cultural traits are completely irrelevant. Fuku and Markakis recognize Allen's (1994) concern regarding the mere dismissal of ethnic/tribal labels, on the grounds that they do represent a social reality, despite the genealogical and cultural lacunae in their make-up. In his study of two ethnic groups in the Sudan and Uganda border area, Allen observes how collective fears and hatreds serve in the production and concretisation of 'specific cultural qualities, the elaboration of tradition, the definition of moral spheres and the articulation of social boundaries' (Allen 1994: 114). Likewise, for Thomas Eriksen (1993) ethnicity simply refers to relationships between groups whose members consider themselves distinctive and, these groups may be ranked hierarchically within a society. He therefore describes ethnicity in terms of 'the classification of people and group relationship' that has 'a political, organisational aspects as well as a symbolic one' (Eriksen 1993: 13) Similarly, for Paul Brass 'ethnicity is a sense of ethnic identity that can be used 'to create internal cohesion and differentiate themselves from other groups' (Brass 1991: 19). He posits that 'ethnicity or ethnic identity also involves in addition to subjective self-consciousness, a claim to status and recognition, either as a superior group or as at least equal to other group' (Ibid).

Nevertheless, Horowitz argues that: 'Many of the puzzle presented by ethnicity become much less confusing once we abandon the attempt to discover the vital essence of ethnicity and instead regard ethnic affiliations as being located along a continuum of ways in which people organize and categorize themselves' (Horowitz 1985: 55). According to Horowitz that although ethnic groups believe in extended kinship and putative common descent, ethnic groups can be placed at various points along the birth-choice

continuum, but not a dichotomy between them. 'There are fictive elements here, but the idea, if not always the fact, of common ancestry makes it possible for ethnic group to think in terms of family resemblance' (Ibid. p. 56). Thus, membership to the ethnic group is typically not chosen but given because the putative kinship ties are the basic criterion (Ibid). As a result, for political mobilization, kinship tie due to their inducing power could be used to establish a compelling organization to pursue political goals. 'If group members are potential kinsmen, a threat to any members of the group may be seen in somewhat the same light as a threat to the family' (Ibid. p. 64). However, Horowitz holds that 'the putatively ascriptive character of ethnic identifications makes interethnic compromise so difficult and poses special difficulties for democratic politics in divided societies' (Ibid. pp. 53-4). Besides, he warns that 'ethnic affiliation is not just a convenient vehicle by which elites satisfy their own class aspirations' (Ibid. p. 89). Despite the fact that the study of ethnicity is confronted with such various terminological and conceptual problems as well as without a shared perspective, much of the literature on the theories of ethnicity is often divided into two broad approaches of primordialists and instrumentalists. These two approaches are discussed below.

### **The Primordialism Argument**

The primordialist conceptualisation of ethnic community is founded on the belief of the 'overpowering' and 'ineffable quality' of primordial attachments that arise from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language and following particular social practices (Geertz 1973). Steven Grosby associates the terms 'primordial' as a cognitive reference to the objects of attachments or ties around which various kinds of kinship are formed (Grosby 1994: 168). It was Edward Shils (1975) who coined the term 'primordial' in his argument that family attachment are embedded in a primordial relational quality that attaches ineffable importance to blood. Following on the line of primordialism, Clifford Geertz argued that primordial identities are given and ineffable that can be overpowering or coercive (Geertz 1973: 259). According to this explanation some attachments flow more from natural affinity than from social interaction. Primordialists maintain that the importance human beings attribute to biological connection is neither capricious nor accidental, but is connected to unique and very close nurturing and relationships that make a bond from generation to generation with an experience of deeply rooted, intimate and eternal belonging. The

congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on, are overpowering and coercive. To that effect Grosby claim that 'this is one of the reasons why human beings have scarified their lives and continue to scarify their lives for their own family and for their own nation' (Grosby 1994: 169). In other words, primordialists believe that pre-modern attachments and historical memories are crucial in shaping and mobilising groups. 'Ethnic groups and nationalities exist because there are traditions of belief and action toward primordial objects such as biological features and especially territorial location' (Ibid. p. 168).

The primordialists argue that though primordial discontent strives more deeply and is less easily satisfied as ethnicity has been manipulated for racism and horrific purposes, modern man has perpetuated similar horrible acts because of philosophical, political, economic, and religious reasons connected to modernity. As Fishman states 'modern man's capacity for committing horrible acts is a by-product of modernity basically unrelated to ethnicity or to the biological assumption of ethnicity in particular' (Fishman 1980: 86). Likewise, Pierre van den Berghe points out that 'brothers do murder each other, but not gratuitously and not as easily as strangers' (van den Berghe 1995: 362). Furthermore, Fishman claims that the manipulation of ethnicity 'to attain political, economic and cultural goal is a modern manifestation and certainly one of the least unique feature of ethnicity'. Thus, according to Fishman, 'ethnicity must be approached seriously, even sympathetically, as a social dimension that has received too little attention and too much abuse during the past two centuries' (Fishman 1980: 84).

Primordialists reject the linear association of ethnicity with conflict or racism, rather they emphasises the need to take advantage of the emotional benefit imbued within ethnicity. In this respect, Fishman believes that ethnicity can serve to exert responsibility to preserve and transmit the great heritage of human existence to generation after generation and its unashamed and vigorous devotion to be related to others as kin 'is one of the most powerful motivation of human kind' (Ibid. p. 85). Especially, at times of uncertainty and change, ethnicity could give direction and identity to preserve our own existence. Fishman argues that ethnicity is continuity within the self and within the link to a common ancestor by experiencing being 'bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh, and blood of their blood' (Ibid. pp. 84-85).

In its extreme version, radical primordialists or sociobiologists, such as Pierre van den Berghe (1981), go to the extent of regarding genetic reproductive capacity as the basis, not only of families and clans, but also of wider ethnic groups. Sociobiologists claim the continuity between kinship and ethnicity and thus consider ethnic groups as wider kinship-based groupings. Pierre van den Berghe holds that kins are likely to cling together than strangers and the chance of cooperation can depend more on the extent of how closely people are related, while cooperation between strangers depends on the incentives or rewards created for all. As he claims that 'an altruistic transactions can be expected if, and only if, the cost benefit ratio of the transaction is smaller than the coefficient of genetic relatedness between the two actors' (van den Berghe 1981: 20). Thus, he argued that because ethnic groups share more genes with co-ethnics therefore they tend to exhibit more self-sacrifice towards kin than non-kin because of, what he identified as an impulse of 'ethnic nepotism' or 'extended kin selection'. In short, people are likely to show nepotistic leaning toward kinsmen and fellow ethnic as 'all social organisms are biologically programmed to be nepotistic, i.e. to behave favourable (or 'altruistically') to others in proportion to their real or perceived degree of common ancestry' (van den Berghe 1995: 360). The main argument of sociobiologist is that a desire of human beings to identify themselves with kith and kin is inherently natural. Ethnicity is like an extended family and therefore it is explained in terms of a biological paradigm or a genetic aspect. For van den Berghe, ethnicity is both primordial and instrumental, as it 'cannot be invented or imagined out of nothing. It can be manipulated, used, exploited, stressed, fused or subdivided, but it must correlate with a pre-existing population bound by preferential endogamy and a common historical experience' (Ibid. p. 361).

With regard to nation-state construction, the primordialists maintain that the drive for efficient, dynamic modern states could directly interact with the drive for personal identity, which is based on primordial ties. The primordialists therefore claim that in areas where the practice of civil politics is deficient or weak, primordial attachments (such as territorial location) could be used to devolve political power and delimit territorial units. In his attempt to establish a link between ethnic identity and state formation, Greetz (1973) claimed that 'in modernizing societies, where the tradition of civil politics is weak...primordial attachments tend, as Nehru discovered, to be repeatedly, in some cases almost continually, proposed and widely acclaimed as preferred bases for the demarcation of autonomous political unit' (Geertz 1973: 26). Geertz warned that 'primordial discontent strives



more deeply and is satisfied less easily', while 'civil discontent finds its natural outlet in the seizing, legally or illegally, of the state's apparatus' (Ibid. p. 261). Thus, he argued that 'economic or class or intellectual disaffection threatens revolution, but disaffection based on race, language or culture threatens partitions, irredentism or merger, a redrawing of the very limits of the state, a new definition of its domain (Ibid.). Similarly, Hameso Y. Seyoum in his optimism regarding ethnicity in Africa (1997) argues that if properly guided, ethnicity could serve in mobilising resources to achieve favourable goals of the human society like social justice, political change and economic development in Africa. He explains that if ethnicity is part and parcel of African identity, it is appropriate to be positive about oneself (Hameso 1997). Hameso claims that it is favourable and desirable for people who share common symbol, history, destiny, and future aspirations to have their own self-administration. Based on the basic assumption of their approach, primordialists criticise the social constructionist thesis of ethnic groups for its disregard of tradition and the fundamental features of human existence. John Armstrong (1982), for example, claims that ethnicity and nationhood are identical and ethnic identities are instrumental in the gradual emergence of modern national identity and territorial-national formation after a long historical process.

On the other hand, primordialism has been criticized for presenting a static and naturalistic view of ethnicity that mystifies emotion and reduces cultural and social behaviour to biological drives. Jack Eller and Reed Coughlan, for example, argue that: 'Ethnicity is surely an affect issue, making it distinct from strictly material or instrumental issues, but this by no means makes it primordial but has a clear and analysable socio-genesis' (Eller and Coughlan 1993:200). Furthermore, the 'given-ness' of ethnicity does not entail that people are condemned to their ethnic attachment forever. The destiny of man is progressive (Kedourie 1993: 69). The primordial assumption ignores 'change and dissolution of ethnic groups, not to speak of the more modern processes of fusion of ethnic groups through intermarriage' (Llobera 1999: 04). Many ethnic groups are often characterised by internal diversity that reflecting various political commitments, lineage cleavages, ideologies, class and occupational backgrounds, as well as differentially located communities (Forrest 2004: 25).

In addition, primordialists underemphasize people's passions and strong dedication to rational values, sense of duties, classes and other socially constructed supreme goals. Cooperation and intimacy among people do not

take place only between kin, but also can extend to non-kin groups based on belief system, ideological commitments, professional interests and other pragmatically required or developed shared commonalities beyond primordial sentiments. Economic, social, political or environmental conditions have a capacity to generate both conflict and cooperation among humankind. Likewise, the primordial theories generally claim that racial and ethnic identities are affectively fulfilling, but fail to address those circumstances in which such identities are used as the basis for inequalities and might thus be socially 'bad' in breeding ethnic inequalities. Thus, the value dimension of primordialism is as incomplete and inconsistent as the theoretical analyses on which they hinge (Thompson 1989: 181).

### **The Instrumentalist Argument**

Instrumentalists highly differ from the primordialist conception of ethnicity. They grasp ethnicity as 'a social construct that emphasizes the sharing of cultural and linguistic characteristic and, kinship roots for the purpose of group mobilization (Messay, 2001: 268). Instrumentalists treat ethnicity as a socially constructed focal point for mobilization. They argue that ethnicity is constructed by particular elite or group driven by competition for political power, economic benefits, social status or other objectives and motives. It is a social, political, and cultural construct for specific and different interests and status groups and consequently an elastic and highly adjustable instrument to serve particular or multiple objectives.

According to Paul Brass (1991) ethnicity or ethnic identity involves a claim to status and recognition, either as a superior group or as group at least equal to other groups; therefore it seeks the articulation and acquisition of social, economic and political rights for the member of the group or for the group as a whole. He describes ethnicity as 'a sense of ethnic identity, consisting of the subjective, symbolic or emblematic use by a group of people of any aspect of culture, in order to differentiate themselves from other groups (Brass, 1991: 18). He holds that the process and benefit of modernisation could unleash ethnic self-consciousness and ethnically based demands if it proceeds unevenly by favouring some ethnic groups or some regions of a country more than others. Thus, 'ethnic communities are created and transformed by particular elites in modernising and in post-industrial society undergoing dramatic social change...through competition between competing elites for political power, economic benefit and social status within and among ethnic category' (Ibid. p. 25). Particularly, competition

and conflict between inter-ethnic elites is considered as the major cause behind ethnic self-consciousness and ethnic-based demands. Basically, for instrumentalists, ethnicity is essentially a political phenomenon, in the sense that it is the association of cultural differences with political cleavages (Cohen 1969). It is the identification of political domination and oppression with identity manifestations in order to mobilise and organise political resistance and action. Ethnic consciousness usually has a political connotation as it easily provides the basis for joint political action in case of threat or opportunity. Accordingly, instrumentalists hold that rather than common descent, shared political experiences and commonalities of political memories are crucial in forging ethnic consciousness and belief in a common ethnicity. According to Barth, ethnicity is a form of social organization that emphasizes cultural difference between groups whose symbolic and social boundaries have been established due to specific ecological, economic, historical or political situations (Barth 1969). Moreover, Barth argues, that 'ethnic identities function as categories of inclusion/exclusion and of interaction about which both ego and alter must agree if their behaviour is to be meaningful' (Barth 1969:132). Thus, to a great extent ethnic leaders or ethnic entrepreneurs are the major agents in articulating ethnic group's political and other factional demands (Barth 1969).

Similar to the instrumentalist approach, rational choice theorists like Hechter (1994) assume that 'individuals adapt means to their ends in such a way as to approach the most efficient manner of achieving them', therefore ethnic group will engage in collective action only when they estimate that by doing so they will receive net individual benefit (Hechter 1986: 268). The major assumption of the rational choice argument is that individuals always act in a manner to maximize their benefit. Also, in some circumstances, individuals could choose to act in accordance with the interest of their ethnic group though their net individual benefit at face value may seem less than the collective benefit.

In the case of Africa, Leroy Vail (1985) posits that, in many cases, individuals' commitment and membership to a particular ethnic group is not induced because they dislike others, or not because being a member of the group made them feel good, 'but rather because the ethnic apparatus of the rural area- the chiefs, 'traditional' courts, petty bourgeois intellectuals, and the systematised 'traditional' values of the 'tribe' as embodied in the ethnic ideology- all worked to preserve the very substantial interests which these

men had in their home areas' (Vail 1985:15). Accordingly, Vail that ethnicity has been attractive both to the elites and ordinary men in Africa, particularly, appealed to the elites because it can ensure them a leadership role in the rising political mobilisation. And for the ordinary African men, ethnicity could help them bring a measure of control to the difficult situations in which they have found themselves in their day-to-day life. Moreover, Vail explains that appeal to ethnicity in Africa is also made 'to conserve a way of life that was in the process of being rapidly undermined by the growth of capitalist relations' and then, it may be interpreted as 'a form of popular resistance to the forces that were reshaping African lives' (Ibid.).

In many of ethnic groups in the Horn of Africa, historical memories and ideology based on real historical event or myths such as population movements, conflicts, alliances and other similar events also played an important role in the creation and maintenance of ethnic identities (Fukui 1994: 33), (Lamphear 1994: 63), (Matsuda 1994: 61). In his study of the formation and transformation of ethnic boundaries in the Omo valley of southern-Ethiopia, Katsuyoshi Fukui argues that: 'It is obvious that an ethnic group is not a separate and impervious unit, but one that is in a constant state of flux in relation to its neighbours, merging with one, separating from another, over the course of time' (Fukui 1994: 44). Similarly, David Turton (1986) in his study of ethnic groups in southern Ethiopia finds that in a number of cases, ethnic identities at the periphery have been formed through relationship with other groups. He also discerns a phenomenon whereby a minority group accepted subordination and stigmatisation by the majority group in return for receiving protection against other groups (Turton 1986: 158). Ties formed between groups therefore can also reinforce ethnic identities of the partners (Matsuda 1994: 60).

Furthermore, inclusion of many ethnic groups in the same territory does not necessarily bring ethnic conflict or ethnic hostilities. In his study of ethnicity in the Sudan and Uganda border, Tim Allen (1999: 121) explores how generational durable peaceful relations between two ethnic groups in Uganda's villages was turned into ethnic cleansing because of actions and behaviours of ethnocratic leaders at the state's centre. Similarly, Wendy James in her study of ethnic groups in the Sudan-Ethiopia border area, observed how threats of persecution on basis of ethnic identification had contributed to a growing sense of collective ethnic identity or ethnic 'visibility' for survival among the people who found themselves caught

involuntarily in a conflict (James 1994: 162). She argues that 'visibility' as a distinct ethnic group can be both advantageous and disadvantageous, according to whether one is seeking protection and aid, or avoiding attack and victimization (Ibid. p. 163).

In a study of ethnic conflict in the Horn of Africa, Markakis also concludes that 'ethnicity is an imperative embedded in the foundations of the political order and functions as a controlling factor in the political process, long before an ethnic movement appears to challenge that order' (Markakis 1994: 236). Markakis argues that ethnicity has become catalysts for political conflict in the Horn of Africa due to two objective factors: competition for resources in condition of great scarcity and the role the state plays in controlling the allocation of these resources (Ibid. p. 217).

In such a situation, ethnicity has become the preferred and most efficient basis for political mobilization against the 'ethnocratic state', whose capacity in the distribution of resources is paramount. In his analysis of ethnicity in Africa, Messay (2001) also argues that 'the African ruling elite have fashioned 'a patrimonial system of authority' intent on excluding competitors and rewarding followers. Ethnicity and ethnonationalism is born of protest against this exclusion, for the purpose of controlling the political resources of the state' (Messay 2001: 272). Conflict is not waged for its own sake, but for desired objectives (Fukui 1994: 44). The postcolonial African states 'introduced a new prize for rival ethnic communities over which to fight and a frightening new force with which to contend' (Smith 2000: 22). Hence, in some cases, the rise of ethnic identity is attributable to specific types of interactions between the leadership of centralizing states and the elites from the local ethnic groups, especially but not exclusively on the peripheries of those states (Brass 1991: 29). 'Conflicts either between competing landholders and alien conquerors, between competing religious elites or between religious leaders and local aristocracy that the first stage of ethnic transformation often begin' (Ibid).

In these respects, Markakis, in his 'situational perspective' approach based in the context of the Horn of Africa, concludes that: 'an ethnic group as a political actor is a product of the situation, not of history, and what mobilises its members to take collective action is concern for future prospects, not an atavistic attachments to the past' (Markakis 1994: 236). Ethnic groups' sense of sharing the same material and social prospects are more important than ethnic identity because identity is defined in the process of interaction- co-

operation, competition, confrontation, even war- among groups (Ibid). In a similar vein, though Forrest (2004: 02) argues that collaborative political behaviour in pre-colonial times- among villages, localities, groups, leaders, and polities- provides historical and cultural subtexts for the assertion of regional autonomy, he states that these pre-colonial traditions cannot explain the rise or expansion of autonomy-seeking ethnic or regional movements. Rather, he emphasises the overarching instrumental, situational, ascriptive and economic factors that were present in colonial and post-colonial periods. He asserts that ‘when ascriptive and instrumental political behaviour coincides with the evolution of constructivist and materialist factors, the conditions for subnationalist movement mobilization are favourable’ (Ibid.).

Consequently, Messay argues ‘that contrary to atavistic remnant, ethnicity is a strong social force that must be properly considered and managed in order to obliterate its destructive roles in politics’ (Messay 2001: 283). Without careful approach and proper treatment, ethnic plurality therefore would lead to conflict production, as the elite becomes the key actors in the creation of ethnic ideology and ethnic politics for acquisition of political power. Political power is the focal point of ethnic claims because it constitutes one of the important ‘rituals by which status is determined’. In this climate of elite competition ‘a fear of ethnic domination and suppression is a motivating force for the acquisition of power as an end and it is also sought for confirmation of ethnic status’ (Horowitz 1985: 187). Public offices or honorific state responsibilities could be used to instrumentalise discrimination or favouritism in distribution of statuses and resources. Particularly, in multiethnic African societies an exclusive access to state’s resources and power by a particular group could create a process of ‘social closure’ that can alienate others groups from playing any significant role in politics and economics. An ethnocratic state that monopolises politics and economics in favour of a specific ethnic group is the major breeding ground for producing ethnonationalist movements. As Max Weber states that ethnic group ‘can has a political meaning, it easily provides the basis for joint political action on the part of the group members or *Volksgenossen* who consider one another as blood relatives’ (Roth and Wittich 1968: 394).

Aware of the potential difficulties involved in nation-building, the instrumentalists belief to consider ethnic identity as a core criterion in state construction may be very awkward since there is always incompatibility between state territories and ethno linguistic homogeneity. On the other hand, the awful option of using brutal force to bring about the desired

homogeneous space with a single language and uniform conception of history has become difficult and also considered to be ineffective in many places.

In sum, the core argument of instrumentalism is that ethnicity is flexible and changeable; circumstances can shape or change the symbolic and social boundaries that define the ethnic group. Ethnicity is therefore dynamic and changes according to new circumstances; group shifts their content and boundary according to circumstances. Individuals or groups do not belong to a particular ethnic group on a permanent basis. Through the process of fission and fusion, and other considerations like sense of security or material interests, people change their ethnic affiliation or can belong to more than one ethnic group at the same time.

Nevertheless, the critique of instrumentalists points out firstly, the instrumentalist's underestimation of the subjective and affective side of human society by reducing them to instruments of mere material or other interests by undervaluing 'the roles of both the sacred and ethnicity in kindling mass fervour and self-sacrifice' (Smith 2000: 25). In Africa, ethnic groups often retained a significant portion of their pre-colonial linguistic and cultural identity (Forrest 2004: 29). According to Kwesi Prah that: 'The overwhelming masses of Africans continue to live in fairly coherent tradition-bound communities in rural Africa...from pre-colonial times to the present, cultural features like kinship systems, belief systems and religious practices, mythology, languages, cultural value systems and other customary usages have been real in Africa' (Prah 2004: 8-16). Secondly, the instrumentalism claim of excessive mutability of ethnic group is challenged by experiences of some nations in which identities are more fixed for longer period of time or have shown strong ethnic component like in France, Greece and Switzerland. Anthony Smith argues that: '...the civic-territorial and ethnocultural ideals of the nation are closely interwoven...in logic there may be a good case for such distinction, but in practice it is difficult to find any examples of a 'pure' cultural nationalism, freed from its ethnic moorings. It is certainly not to be found in Europe' (Smith 2000: 18-19). Thirdly, instrumentalist's approach is also criticised for its exaggerated belief in the power of elite manipulation of the masses and neglecting of the wider cultural environment in which elite competition and rational maximization take place (Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 09). Forrest explains that in Africa, 'certain aspects of social and cultural lineage enable contemporary peoples to identify with specific pre-colonial collectivities...

even if identities did not always congeal as ethnic group in pre-colonial Africa, there may not have been as clean a break in social continuity as hard-line constructivists presume' (Forrest 2005: 28). Instrumentalist and primordialist influences are in many cases closely interlinked. Ethnic groups behaviour are influenced by a 'double action' between elites' goal and individuals' conceptualisation of identity. It involves a dynamic interaction (Ibid. p. 10). Fourthly, the instrumentalists approach is criticized for reducing qualitatively different beliefs into some putatively uniform 'real' cause, for example, 'interest', 'power' 'emotion' due to reductionism thereby denying the relative independence of the achievements of the mind and the plurality of orientation of human action (Grosby 1994:167).

### **Summary and relevance to Ethiopia**

Despite the various approaches and interpretations, as presented above, ethnicity remains a theoretical challenge and an empirical nuisance. It is often associated with conflict, instability and carnage. The cause can vary from case to case. Though there is no necessary connection between ethnicity and conflict as Horowitz argues, the basis for confrontation may emerge due to the inclusion of two or more ethnic communities within a single or adjacent territory of a state characterised by discriminatory and uneven status and resource allocations. 'An ethnic contrast that has produced an extraordinary amount of conflict in many African, Asian, and Caribbean states is the juxtaposition of 'backward' and 'advanced' groups' (Horowitz 1985: 148). A system of oppression and subjugation of ethnic groups, elitist manipulations for autonomy or separation, reassertion of a once-predominant role, uneven regional development and other visible or putative inequalities could trigger ethnic hostilities and conflicts. Particularly, when the economic inequalities and the lop-sided distribution of political rewards in multiethnic states are attached to specific ethnic groups due to the process of state formation and expansion, the likelihood of separatist ethnic movements and conflicts could be high. As Ted Gurr (1994) in his cross-national study of communal based conflicts, shows that in many instances ethnic tensions and conflicts are more likely when certain groups perceive discrimination or exploitation in the context of state formation. Gurr notes that ethnic conflicts are usually centre on three general issues: 'the desire for 'exit' or independence from the state, the demand for greater autonomy within the state or the recognition and protection of minority interests within a plural society (Gurr 1994: 111). He also adds that 'ethnic identity and interest per se do not risk unforeseen ethnic wars; rather, the danger is



hegemonic elites who use the state to promote their own people's interest at the expense of others (Gurr 2000: 64). Thus, he warns that 'the push of state corruption and minority repression probably will be a more important source of future ethnic wars than the 'pull' of opportunity' (Ibid).

Similarly, Joshua Forrest (2004), in his investigation of the process of political mobilisation of subnational movements in Africa, argues that growing tendencies toward regional assertions and autonomy seeking are increasingly challenging the African states (Forrest 2004: 20). He enumerates four overarching processes that were manifest in the colonial period and the post-independence era as important causative factors that could help to explain the expansion of autonomy or secession seeking subnational movements in contemporary Africa. These are the history of state intervention in regional affairs ('situationalism and constructivism'), long-term economic inequalities ('material'), individual's conscious or ascriptive adherence to ethnic or regional identity pattern ('ascriptive identity'), and manipulation by regional political leaders or elites ('instrumentalist leadership') (Ibid, pp. 9-14). He, thus, suggests that the growth of autonomy-seeking ethnoregional movements and the pattern of mobilization in the present-day Africa necessitates a negotiated political framework based on indigenously legitimate forms of power that can provide sufficient autonomy at the regional or local level (Ibid. p. 250). Another scholar also maintains that 'if indeed ethnicity and ethnic organisations provide security to groups in an uncertain environment, then attempts to replace or outlaw them may have the effect of increasing insecurity' (Horowitz 1985: 567-8). As Connor (1994: 83) points out that ethnonational group members are 'obsessed with a vision of freedom from domination by non-members' and therefore they inclined to persistently struggle for self-rule or autonomy (Ibid.). 'A fear of ethnic domination and suppression is a motivating force for the acquisition of power as an end and it is also sought for confirmation of ethnic status' (Horowitz 1985: 187).

Understanding such circumstances, it is essential to embark on a sensitively designed political engineering in order to device appropriate power-sharing frameworks that could mitigate destructive conflicts in deeply divided societies. Rather optimistically, Horowitz asserts that even if ethnic problems are intractable, they are not altogether without hope; 'even in the most severely divided societies, ties of blood do not lead to ineluctably to rivers of blood' (Ibid. p. 682). Power-sharing political frameworks that could encourage inter-ethnic cooperation by ensuring recognition of some

prominent group's rights could be one option to minimise group's resentments and mitigate destructive conflicts. As Gurr suggests that 'with a little bit of luck and a great deal of international engagement, ethnic conflict's heyday will belong to the last century' (Gurr 2000: 64). Horowitz also stresses on the importance of timing in engineering a political process and structure, because 'accommodation long delayed may be accommodation ultimately denied' (Horowitz 1985: 617). Although prior prescription or commitment to a single institutional form may not be helpful, federalism is often considered to be an appropriate arrangement in the provision of accommodative and flexible political frameworks notwithstanding ethnic cleavages and competitions.

In the Ethiopian context, in many cases, the emergence of ethnic consciousness and ethnic mobilization may not due to inherent atavistic or primordial sentiments, but due to social, political and economic reasons. However primordial factors such as putative common descent, ancestral linkage, language and the like have become a foundation for nurturing of solidarity and political mobilization by the elites. Conceptually, three major intellectual perspectives exist in Ethiopia's political debate in connection to Ethnicity. The first perspective believes that the Ethiopian society has reached a stage of common identity by nurturing a common Ethiopian citizenship by obliterating primordial attachments and loyalties (Daniel 1992; Alem 1993). The second perspective believes that Ethiopia is a home for numerous distinct ethnic groups that need to get some form of political representation and self-administration (Merera 2003; Fasil 1997). The third perspective argues that the Ethiopian state was established through a series of conquests and colonization of various nations and societies such as Oromo and Somali that lay beyond its jurisdiction (Mohammed 1999; Assefa 1993; Dolal 1992).

At the political level, there have been ethnic organizations in the name of various ethnic groups such as Afar, Oromo, Somali, Sidama, and Tigrayan since the 1970s. At present due to the policy of ethnic restructuring and ethnic entitlement since 1991 there are nearly hundred ethnic organizations that are legally registered in Ethiopia (National Election Board of Ethiopia 2005). Although a detail study is not carried out on the nature and conviction of these ethnic organizations, it is plausible to claim that in many cases that the major inspirational forces for these ethnic organizations are the attainment of social, political and economic objective rather than primordial or atavistic drives. In almost all cases, the claims for ethnic mobilization and

solidarity have been made in the context of redressing 'injustices of the past', reclaiming of dignified existence and self-administration, developing of culture and usage of languages which were ignored and barred in the past. These claims are more of a demand for social status, political power and economic benefits (instrumental) rather than preserving or nurturing relationships that make a bond from generation to generation or recognising the overpowering and coercive congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on (primordial). However, putative generational bond or primordial attachment has been exploited to advance these social, political and economic objectives and this has inclined to create a 'permanent' cleavage that could widen and has opened a venue for further exclusion, discrimination and hostilities.

Markais (1994) claims that the rise of ethnic mobilisation and movement in the Horn of Africa (including Ethiopia) has been aiming in controlling or weakening the state that has a great role in the allocation of resources, political power and social status. Especially, when the central state is identified or accused with ethnic category or ethnic favouritism, the chance for ethnic mobilisation would be high. In this connection, the central rule in Ethiopia has always been accused of favouring particular ethnic groups. Prior to 1991, some ethnic and regional liberation movements from Eritrea, Tigray, Oromo and Somali described the central rule as an 'Amhara rule', and this gave an advantage for the movements to mobilise significant supporters and fighters in ethnic lines. A call for a 'primordial' solidarity has become a crucial factor in consolidating a struggle and fight to achieve non-primordial political, economic and social objectives.

Since 1991, the federal government in Ethiopia has been described as a Tigrayan dominated government and thus various ethnic movements are rising to challenge the alleged domination of the Tigrayan group on the bases of ethnic solidarity.

Thus, it can be plausible to assert that the rise of ethnic solidarity in Ethiopia is not because of primordial tendencies but rather because of the social and historical factors of suppression, alienation, differentiation and exclusion. It is misleading to describe the rise of ethnic resentments and demands in Ethiopia in terms of 'primordialism' as it may discolour the essence of the problem. It is not because people wanted to preserve or glorify their 'primordial' identity, but because they wanted to protect their social, political and economic rights in the face of alienation, subordination and

domination by the central rule. In connection to the southward expansion of the central rule, as Messay eloquently put it that 'exportable products such as coffee and gold were already being produced [in the south]. Land was plentiful and most appropriate for cash crop products of whatever kind. There emerged a form of ethnic mentality imbued with a sense of superiority that had one single goal: to justify land appropriation and install the rights of private property (Messay 1999: 53). Importantly, 'the ethnic difference made land extortion easier both ideologically and politically' (Ibid.).

Ethnic classification and categorisation in Ethiopia could therefore be explained mainly in terms of a social-historical construct, which has been born out of a resistance against the injustice of a central rule that identified itself (and also identified by others) in terms of a '*Shewan*' provincialism. However, in the process the 'force of blood' has brought emotionalism and rigidity among the ethnic movements and strengthened primordial sentiments in order to build politically significant ethnic movements by exaggerating sectional claims and distinctiveness. More importantly, the 1960s and 70s student movement in Ethiopia which had extensive debates on various issues and problems of Ethiopia, had been highly influenced by the contemporary radical thinking of Marxism and Leninism, and the Leninist solution of the nationalities question which theoretically up-holds the principle of self-determination including secession for resolving the national questions (Teshale 1995: 176, Messay 2002: 12; Marcus 2002: 221). Although the student movement was very radical in its tone of criticising the ruling class for the whole misery and neglect of the nationalities in Ethiopia, except the Eritreans movement, it advocated an idea that a nationalities question in Ethiopia should be considered constructively to allow some sort of regional autonomy or self-government.

Nonetheless, the above discussion reveals that ethnicity is a very elusive and fluid phenomenon both at empirical and theoretical levels; under such circumstances the task of constructing a political framework like federalism using such elusive and fluid conceptualisation would certainly be difficult.

Although, the primordialists' emphasis on the 'givens' and 'permanency' of ethnic identities is highly exaggerated, the instrumentalists assumption of fluidity of ethnic identities is equally overstated. Ethnic identities and ethnic solidarities have become reduced and subtle when societies find other solidarities on the bases of professionalism, class, political opinion and other opportunities. On the other hand, ethnic identities and solidarities become

essential and meaningful when people are facing real or imagined threats of persecution or discrimination based on their identities; and it is in such situations ethnic solidarity are consolidated until the menace has subsided. Some identities have remained solid and active for many generations due to unforgettable past experiences and on-going threats and opportunities, while others have diluted early and easily. As a result, the existing societal relations in the political, social and economic arenas and other factor like historical memories are very important in shaping the pattern and magnitude of ethnic relations and ethnic solidarity.

Despite its nebulousness, ethnicity is becoming a reality in mobilizing large numbers of communities under its ethos and desires. Various political thinking and arrangements that have been proposed and tried in order to obliterate diversity have not been successful so far, rather some of the extreme measures such as forced centralisation, assimilation, expulsion or ethnic cleansing have brought about unending and colossal violence and humanitarian crises. It has remained very difficult either to recognise or refuse ethnic entitlement in state restructuring. Recognizing the legitimacy of ethnic demands for autonomy could institute discrimination and strengthen the distinctiveness and cohesiveness of ethnic identity, which is a fluid and elusive phenomenon and encourages the proliferation of further ethnic claims. On the other hand, denying the rights could also strengthen the distinctiveness and cohesiveness of ethnic identities by providing a breeding ground for elevating resentments against the centre; such a denial could be used to consolidate and crystallize a group's identity in order to mobilize resistance against the centre.

Many scholars in the field argue that one of the characteristics of federalism is its aspiration and purpose to generate and maintain both unity and diversity simultaneously (Elazar 1987: 67; Watts 1999: 06; Agranoff 1998: 11). But recognition of diversity in federal system must be anchored in a national ideal that transcends any fixed divisions of power. A hybrid federal model that guarantees group autonomy with high incentives for integration and inter-ethnic cooperation could be a forward-looking approach. As Agranoff put it 'there must be a fabric of wholeness that moves the federal idea forward' (Agranoff 1998: 14). However, the wholeness and the national idea should not be promoted through coercion, but through recurrent bargaining progression and flexible arrangements based on the principles of self-rule and shared-rule.

Political arrangements in multiethnic societies should take into consideration the configuration of ethnic cleavages and rivalries in practical conditions. As the effectiveness of federalism 'in accommodating shared-rule with self-rule for constituent ethnic groups depends upon the degree to which the groups are geographically concentrated and so can be territorially demarcated (Watts 2000b: 40). But there is a general agreement- both scholarly and empirically- that there must be a less violent and non-offensive political designs that could accommodate rather than exacerbate cleavages. Besides, encouraging ethnic entitlement simply because of glorification of primordial attachments could be a recipe for institutionalising ethnic hostilities and ethnic competition that could represent serious risks for public cohesion and governability in multiethnic societies.

In this connection, the on-going ethnic federal arrangement in Ethiopia is not a genuine reflection of either the interests of the ethnic liberation movements or the ethnic communities. It is simply driven by a sectional interest of the TPLF that used a divide and rule strategy in order to countervail its minority position in the ethnic map of Ethiopia.

The federal process in Ethiopia was derailed from the start. The July 1991 conference that wedded ethnic discourses in official Ethiopian political terrain was filled by intriguing and tricking modalities in enrolling the participants, setting the agendas and reaching agreements or consensuses. The charter, which was the major offspring of the conference and the first official document that endorsed ethnic rights in Ethiopia, was filled with some controversial provisions such as the right to secede. The charter was the basic document that imbued the succeeding Ethiopian constitution (1995) as its tone and vocals were visibly stamped in the core principles of the constitution. Though, the EPRDF has considered the transitional period charter as a legitimate contract to restructure the Ethiopian polity into an ethnic federal system, the charter was produced by an assembly which had neither the direct representation of the Ethiopian peoples nor the approval of the various ethnic groupings. It was just a collection of self-appointed ethnic elites who assumed that they could determine and represent the interests of their respective ethnic communities

It can be certainly established that the ethnic federal structure in Ethiopia was negotiated in a manner that neither the Ethiopian people nor the ethnic groupings have been provided an opportunity for consultation; it was engineered by the TPLF and agreed by the ethnic elites. The assumption was

that ‘the leaders of the different nations bear the moral and political burden of guiding and counselling the people in their national and political constituencies (Kinfe 1994: 62). In this view, the major responsibility in transforming politics and society in Ethiopia was laid upon the ethnic elites rather than the ethnic communities or the people. Because it was believed that the ethnic elites’ kinship tie with their community would give them a better chance for leadership and privileged position. Basically, it was an imposed structure that was founded on a very wobbly and fictitious foundation as it reflects only the desire of the ruling government, which came to power through armed struggle. The ethnic elites may have naively and egoistically legitimised the TPLF’s blue print. However, once its power was anchored, the TPLF started the process of capturing and manipulating the ethnic communities through manufacturing surrogate ethnic organisations and of course by sidelining the ethnic elites that established the transitional government. It put down the foundation and conditions for its hegemonic desire and goal, but at the expense of derailing genuine political negotiation and reconciliation in Ethiopia. All major opposition groups boycotted the subsequent key political activities such as the 1992 local election, the 1994 election for constitutional assembly and the 1995 and 2000 general elections.

The TPLF has attempted to remain in power through a superficial and deceitful coalition device, the EPRDF. The TPLF-led EPRDF is striving to sustain a political travesty that would assure the TPLF’s hegemonic project by using ethnic rights discourse. Ethnic rights and ethnic entitlement have become an attractive inducement for many of elites from various ethnic groups to fall so easily in the trap of the TPLF’s manipulation and machination. These self-appointed elites, which did not have any legitimacy from their respective ethnic communities, have become an instrument of the TPLF’s hegemonic desire, as they were easily susceptible to TPLF’s rewarding or/and coercing power.

To get out of the quagmire, the federal model in Ethiopia needs to consider multiple criteria such as geography, socio-economic factors, settlement patterns, linguistic considerations, population mix and other essential factors. For instance, most of the urban areas are inhabited by synchronized multiethnic communities where ethnic identities are so diluted and less significant and ethno linguistic criterion have become inappropriate and inapplicable. Whereas, the rural areas, where the overwhelming Ethiopians live, are inhabited in most cases by a concentration of a specific ethno-

linguistic community in a specific territory, it may raise a need for some kind of structure that could recognize such settlement pattern and linguistic considerations, but with utmost respect for the rights of minority residents. More importantly, the federal project in Ethiopia should reward ethnic fluidity and intermix by politically discouraging exclusive arrangements and fragmentations that could hinder mobility and evolutionary fusion.

Furthermore, it is important to create a hybrid federal model that can respect ethnic groups, encourage inter-ethnic cooperation, evolutionary fusion and harmonisation by suppressing hubris and upholding humility; by engineering a political interaction that promotes respect and trust while undermining and dissuading vengeance and arrogant behaviours and activities. A political system that recognises and respects diverse identities, upholds achievements and merits in place of ascriptive requirements and nepotism can lead to the creation of a desirable system based on trust and tolerance among ethno-linguistic groups. After all, ethnic identity or nationality are not an all-embracing or the greatest identity of an individual, community or people. People used to change them frequently when opportunities or threats are greater. There are various and plural identities in which people would find very important, of course, ethnic identity could be one of them. As Amartya Sen (2006) powerfully put it that: “The illusion of unique identity is much more divisive than the universe of plural and diverse classification that characterize the world in which we actually live.”



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